

# A Case for Listener Participation

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RADIO has learned to involve the listener emotionally in a wide variety of broadcasts. The problem of involving him intellectually, however, is one with which radio men are still struggling. Most of the formats for public affairs broadcasts—the panel, the round table, and the two-man discussion—tend to reduce the listener to the status of eavesdropper, rather than participant, while in some ways the announcer presenting his commercial appeal

does more to promote listener participation than do the experts. Here, perhaps, lies the key to a type of public affairs program which will enable the radio listener to think with, rather than merely be an auditor of, the public affairs program.

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**I**N THE EVERYDAY business of the radio industry public opinion polls are carefully scrutinized and evaluated, for the success of radio is peculiarly dependent upon keeping in touch with the majority reactions of the population. In addition to such study, radio networks and in some cases individual stations occasionally commission public opinion research agencies to conduct studies specifically for the use of radio people. These activities, though important, are nevertheless minor in comparison with radio's great concern with the study of two questions which also fall into the area of public opinion. These questions are: 1) How many people express behavioral, affirmative reactions by listening to specified programs? and 2) What changes in the programs will most consistently increase such affirmative action?

In answering the first of these questions, the radio industry works constantly at improving the various audience ratings. It has also assembled a good deal of information regarding "successful" program building. Some of it is based on highly competent research; for example, the studies utilizing the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analysis technique. A good deal of additional information has accumulated from experience, trial and error, intuition, and occasional flashes of genius.

The primary criterion for success, for demonstrated "know how" in winning radio audience approval, is the extent of behavior denoting acceptance by the audience. Thus if five million people are motivated

to return to a program on consecutive Tuesdays because of what they hear in the program, that program is considered to be more successfully produced than if a faithful audience of only fifty thousand is achieved.

There are a few well established rules for increasing audience size. By far the most important one is to involve the listener in such a manner that he is caught up, identified with a protagonist, and carried along through affective identification with the unfolding, on-going program. The "compressed participation" which can be observed in an animated sports spectator is a visible example of the kind of vicarious participation that, if achieved in the listener, is the signal of "success" in radio. Such phrases as "sustained suspense," "deep involvement," and "listener identification" all relate to this difficult but established road to radio audience-building.

The very obvious correlate of what has been stated thus far is that success in radio is generally measured by indices of the degree of compatible *emotion* released in the audience. There is tacit and nearly universal agreement that "good radio" gets that way by its *affective* appeal.

But let us pose a theoretical question. Suppose the purpose of a program is such that the stimulation of *affect* is by definition undesirable, or contradictory to the achievement of the purpose. In such a case, orientation in terms of affective appeals would become inappropriate, and separate criteria for "success" and for "improvement" would need to be devised.

The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical discussion of public affairs programs which are specifically intended to promote scientific thinking on basic current issues. In this instance, we postulate the desirability of minimizing emotional stimulae and maximizing intellectual or rational factors. Correspondingly, criteria for estimating success or methods for improvement must be readjusted in terms of the objective of the program, and the distinctive characteristics of radio as a medium for fostering scientific thinking must be reexamined.

#### RADIO AS A MEDIUM FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROGRAMS

Although radio is popularly classified as a medium for communication with masses, it is in a far more literal sense a device for point-to-point communication—communication between the broadcaster and a listener, or not more than two or three listeners. When Hitler ordered tens of thousands into public squares to hear his speeches over public

address speakers, then radio was in fact communicating with masses, and the characteristics of mutual reenforcement, cumulative effect and "rigged" reactions could be fully utilized. The theater and the cinema are media for communication with masses. By contrast, reading a book is a true example of point-to-point communication. The communication moves from the author to solitary readers.

Several writers have speculated that as a listener hears a broadcast, his experience is in part conditioned by the consciousness of many others doing the same. This factor, however, has not been demonstrated to be important, if indeed it even exists to a significant degree. Radio, as we know it, must be regarded as one way, point-to-point communication.

Because of the basic importance of *interaction* in communicative processes, radio program structure has understandably moved in the direction of achieving interaction at the microphone, since true interaction between broadcaster and listener is impossible. The net result is that the listener has been jockeyed into the role of eavesdropper.

The stated objective, that is, the stimulation of scientific thinking on basic problems by the listener, implies a role far from that of an eavesdropper for the listener. He must participate. He must think. And thinking is notoriously hard work. Its difficulty increases directly in proportion to the listener's reluctance to disallow his prejudices, predispositions, and individual background. The eavesdropping role and the inability of the listener to interact by actually conversing with the broadcaster are important factors, characteristic of the medium, which must insofar as possible be counteracted.

We have already arrived at certain conclusions. *First*, the technique which is used must be calculated to foster maximal participation on the part of the listener, and to minimize his estimate of himself as an eavesdropper. *Second*, broadcasting techniques that gratify popular prejudices or predispositions, or that make their primary appeal through emotional involvement are, by definition, unsuitable. *Third*, since the desired activity is orderly thinking, the appeal of the program will certainly be restricted to a minority group. Audience size cannot be a criterion of success.

At this early stage it is perhaps appropriate to admit that our theoretical discussion tends to lead us away from the probability of widespread practical application. Once we postulate a minority appeal,

we must face up to the fact that a network or a station broadcasting a program that attracts very few listeners is comparable to a large factory which, for a specified interval, shuts down all but a small percentage of its productive machinery. Networks and individual stations do this very thing, however, and not infrequently. They do it because minority interests are often none the less significant interests.

To these beginnings, we may add certain other postulates.

1. There must be either difference of opinion or else substantial lack of knowledge concerning the topics to be treated.
2. There must be general agreement that the topic is important.
3. The program must be as effective as possible in stimulating thinking.

This latter obvious point leads to the puzzling problem of determining the manner of presentation. Let us review the most used formats for public affairs discussion programs, in search of the one most appropriate for stimulating scientific thinking.

#### THE FORMATS: PANEL, ROUND TABLE, AND TWO-MAN DISCUSSION

The panel-of-partisans format in which discussants are selected on a "calculated-scrap" basis invites listener-spectators, rather than listener-participants. This dialectic matchmaking probably has its origins in the early courts of law where verbal duels were only a step short of the field of honor. Casting such a panel involves as careful a selection of ingredients as does a chemical formula designed to produce heat. The listener's chief opportunity to participate in the discussion lies in emotional identification with one discussant or with one side of the argument. He will find it difficult to think dispassionately.

The debate-question-and-answer format is roughly analogous to a baseball game. Opposing sides make their pitch, and the audience restrains its heckling until the question and answer period. Observation of a few of these question and answer periods will confirm this analogy. The questions are seldom bona fide requests for information. They are usually verbal thrusts intended to confuse or expose the one to whom the question is directed. The radio listener tends to identify with the speaker or the questioner who reenforces his own preconceptions. This act of identification often affords the listener a good deal of enjoyment, but there is little basis for supposing that he learns to think more rationally.

Perhaps the format that has attained the most general acceptance as a serious discussion technique is the round table. The round table has its origins in antiquity and was invented, presumably, to facilitate informal conversational exchange *within* a small group. The modern seminar, conference table, and "bull session" serve the same general purpose, but always, as with the original, for the benefit of the initiates —those admitted to the table.

As adapted to radio, the round table usually presents three or four authorities on a particular question and offers the listener an eavesdropping experience. It is characteristic of professionally informed people that they speak to each other in symbols and technical jargon poorly understood by laymen. In addition, and this is even more important from the standpoint of the listener, they are prone to accept without review a great volume of data basic to the subject but usually not at the immediate command of those hearing the broadcast. Thus the essential early stages of thinking through a problem are generally omitted, and the listener hears only differing conclusions set one against another with more or less eloquence. It is perhaps significant that what he receives in addition to conclusions is generally called *supporting evidence*, and consists of selected startling observations or statistics which seem to make a given conclusion more reasonable than it would otherwise be. Such evidence can be as well assembled *after* the speaker has decided upon his conclusion as before. It may or may not have had any relevance in arriving at the conclusion.

The round table, then, tends to assemble persons with vested interests and conflicting conclusions. These experts engage in a contest to see who can make his conclusion sound most attractive. This process has only the remotest relationship to the stimulation of scientific thinking in the listener. Granting the complete sincerity and integrity of the discussants, and also granting their technical and intellectual competence, the format simply has not evolved along lines that permit the demonstration of scientific problem solving. If one discussant attempted to review the thinking process that led him to his conclusion, he would almost certainly be the loser for his pains, since he would certainly be interrupted before he had stated his basic premises and assumptions.

The "good" moderator urges short statements, punchy points, no silence, a few humorous bits. The man who says, "I will have to begin by reviewing a few points which, in the beginning, may seem quite

irrelevant to the topic," strikes terror to the heart of a moderator. The round table is informed conversation, spiced with opposition, and the listener is given the titillating experience of eavesdropping on experts.

The two-man discussion, a device as old as conversations between men, satisfies our stated requirements more nearly than the other formats. While at best it is a rational conversation piece between two well-informed discussants, and at worst it falls into the error of polarized debate, its virtue lies in its simplicity of interaction at the microphone. But even here the listener is most frequently frozen out of the discussion and remains in his role of eavesdropper.

The traditional formats, then, fail to satisfy the requirements of maximal stimulation of scientific thinking on the part of the listener. We have seen in every instance that two basic faults exist. *First*, the listener hears conclusions argued. He witnesses a contest in the defense of various prepared positions. He hears little if anything of the orderly process of thinking which led to the initial acceptance of these conclusions. *Second*, the listener is addressed obliquely, not directly, even though radio is intrinsically a means of point-to-point communication. The interaction is at the microphone between speakers rather than between speaker and listener.

#### THE LOWLY ANNOUNCER

It may cause some surprise to note that the commercial announcer delivering his sales message is the only one in radio who consistently addresses himself directly to the individual listener. He is generally unconcerned about interaction at the microphone. He speaks "into" rather than "in front of" the microphone. He has discarded the platform speaker's device of speaking *to the audience*. He speaks *to you*. Perhaps the point may be sharpened as follows: Who asks *you* questions over the radio? The answer, with very few exceptions, is: Only the commercial announcers.

Although the announcer and his person-to-person commercial message is subject to much criticism, this criticism comes largely from an articulate minority of sophisticated and highly educated people. On the other hand, the effectiveness of the announcer in reaching large masses of individuals is testified to by the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars by shrewd businessmen for the privilege of having the announcers deliver their person-to-person communications. The

announcer speaks directly to the individual listener, and the listener responds in such terms as to support the radio industry.

Two other groups of broadcasters would seem, at first thought, to belong in the same category as announcers since they address the microphone in solitary fashion. The first is the speaker who delivers a "talk." But those who deliver "talks" almost invariably cling to the traditional platform technique of speaking to a large group of people. This is nicely demonstrated by the radio cliché, "My unseen audience." The second group of broadcasters is composed of news reporters and commentators. But they, because of the nature of their material, are little concerned with interaction.

Perhaps the one person, except for commercial announcers, who really utilized the possibilities of point-to-point communication—who used radio as it can be used for intimate communication—was Franklin D. Roosevelt. Whether consciously or by intuition, he discarded the speech format, placed the microphone in a homelike setting, and introduced fireside chats. He has yet to be rivalled in his person-to-person communicative success. Perhaps part of his success is attributable to his having sensed and utilized the intrinsic characteristics of the medium.

Here then is a cue to the transition of the listener from the status of eavesdropper to the status of participant.

#### PROPOSED FORMAT FOR FOSTERING SCIENTIFIC THINKING

Theoretically, the ideal format for fostering scientific thinking would feature a single speaker whose objective it would be to involve individual listeners in the process of scientific thinking.

This person would, in monologue, announce a question and then for thirty minutes retrace the processes which led him to his conclusion. He would state and acknowledge his assumptions and postulates as such. He would review the thinking which led to tentative conclusions which later were rejected as fallacious. He would marshal his facts in condensed form, mentioning sources for those who wished to check them. He would point out the weaknesses in his own conclusion and the strengths in rejected alternatives. He would discuss the probable consequences of his conclusion and those of rejected conclusions. In short, he would externalize, in orderly form, the intellectual paths he had traveled in thinking through a problem.

At the close of a program, he would invite the listener to write to him, pointing out any untenable assumptions, omissions of crucial data, evidences of unrecognized prejudice, or other violations of scientific thinking. On alternate programs, then, he would reexamine the thinking delineated on the preceding programs.

The style of delivery would be similar to that of a man arguing with himself, posing questions and answering them, discovering errors in thinking or detecting the influence of preconceptions.

The listener could then, in a very real way, identify himself with the speaker. He could, so to speak, get inside of a fine mind. He could acquire techniques of critical thinking, not by learning abstract rules, but by vivid experience in the process itself. In such a program the two major faults observed in the traditional discussion formats appear to have been overcome. The listener hears the process of thinking, not the defense of a foregone conclusion, and he participates directly in that he becomes fused with the speaker in the process of reflective thinking.

Needless to say, the qualifications for a speaker who could conduct such a program would be severe. He would have to meet such standards as:

1. A sterling reputation for intelligence, integrity, and objectivity.
2. Independence of partisan affiliations.
3. Adeptness in expressing complex thoughts in simple language.
4. Expertness in the *techniques* of scientific thinking.
5. That kind of scientific detachment that leads one to examine his own preconceptions and prejudices as searchingly as he does those of an opponent.

Last, and by way of summary, the speaker must be a Teacher in the best sense of the word. He must be acceptable to the listener as an intellectual ego ideal. He must inspire the listener to "want my mind to work like his." This is quite distinct from the listener wanting slavishly to accept his conclusions! The objective is *not* to teach conclusions, but rather to share the intellectual experience of a disciplined and creative mind in action.

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